

## **Communities @ State**

### **From Diplopedia (the Department of State Wiki)**

The sites in Communities @ State combine content with conversation. They allow easy publication of information, and let readers comment on the material. The program has three goals:

- Promote knowledge sharing within the Department;
- Share information with other Federal agencies; and
- Promote connections and conversation among personnel with shared professional needs and interests.

## **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)**

### **What is Communities @ State?**

Communities @ State is an initiative that enables and encourages State personnel to form online communities to publish information, connect with others and discuss issues.

### **What is a "community"?**

"Community" is short for "community of practice" or "community of interest." These are groups of people who interact on a common work-related need. Ideally, a community's activities are closely aligned with a function or goal. In Communities @ State, these are online communities that use a simple web log tool.

### **What is the goal of Communities @ State?**

The Office of eDiplomacy promotes knowledge-sharing in the Department of State. Much of the institutional knowledge at State is "tacit" knowledge stored in people's heads or "explicit" knowledge that is under-utilized because it is locked away in file drawers, computer files and emails. eDiplomacy looks for ways to help people make this knowledge and expertise available to the Department at large and to other interested Federal agencies. Communities @ State is part of that effort.

### **How does a community work?**

Our online communities center on a versatile and easy-to-use web log. One or more people administer the site for content. Anyone who visits the site can leave a comment. It's that simple.

Each community site has articles called "entries." Each entry is immediately archived by date and topic, and is immediately searchable as soon as it's published. The site can also display images or photos, provide links to documents on the site (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, or any other kind), and show links to other related sites (either government or private-sector).

### **What kind of communities are there?**

Our current and planned communities cover a wide range of subjects.

- general issues regarding an important national region such as southwest China;
- a specific issue in a particular country, such as the economy;
- a job specialty such as office management specialist, country desk officer or information systems manager;
- a particular task such as preparing the annual country human rights report;
- a transnational issue such as avian flu.

### **What is the difference between a "community" and a "work group"?**

They can be the same thing, but for the purposes of Communities @ State, a community generally comprises a group that is open to access and contributions from anyone who wants to read and participate. As noted elsewhere in "About Communities," our communities have various levels of rights to administer and contribute. But the community does not know and does not try to restrict who can avail themselves of the community's knowledge. A work group, in contrast, has a defined set of participants and, generally, a particular task to perform. Access generally is restricted to the defined group of participants.

### **Why bother?**

Communities connect interested people, giving them a place to discuss their work and help others to benefit from their knowledge and experience.

- You can share knowledge with a minimum of effort;
- Other readers can add their own insights and experience to the entries that you post;
- Publishing content is fast and simple;
- Communities provide an archived, categorized, searchable knowledge base;
- The bandwidth requirements are low;
- You can reach a large audience within State, and at other government agencies.
- What technology does Communities @ State use?

If you are reading this page, you already have the only tool you need: a standard Web browser. You don't need to download or install anything at all.

### **Isn't it just a blog?**

All of the communities are powered by Movable Type, a popular commercial software package that produces web logs, or "blogs" for short. Blogs are just a species of Web site. They are "light" tools designed for quick, easy publishing. If you can fill out an online form, you can publish a blog.

All Web sites provide content. Blogs add another dimension: conversation. Movable Type's ease of use and ability to facilitate a discussion make it ideal for an online community.

Blogs have certain advantages as the technology part of an online community. They allow for easy, frequent posting of small amounts of information; the content is arranged chronologically (the most recent entry at the top of the page and the old entries archived); and readers can comment on the authors' entries. Some of our modifications move our online communities beyond a traditional blog. Typically, blogs have only one or two authors, but our online communities often have several or even dozens. The Guest Entry feature allows anyone to post to the blog, and you likely would not see something this open on a typical Internet blog -- we have multiple editors for most blogs, and often traditional blogs with more than one author will still have just one editor. Also, we have a good business and governance process based on experience and best practices to ensure that everyone is clear about goals, content, and management of the communities (see below).

### **Where will my community be seen?**

Our online communities are located on three secure networks: State's unclassified intranet; an interagency unclassified network; and an interagency classified network. The two unclassified networks are accredited at the Sensitive But Unclassified (SBU) level. The classified network can handle information up to the Secret level.

- A community on State's intranet can only be seen by users with access to the intranet, which includes State personnel and most personnel in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID);
- A community on the unclassified interagency network can be seen by any Federal agency, office, or employee with a connection to that network, although some employees in other agencies may need to get a separate ID and password to log in.
- A community on the classified interagency network can be seen by American personnel with security clearances and a connection to the network.

Most of our communities are located on interagency networks because the community administrators wish to engage the interagency community.

### **Does it take a lot of time to run a community?**

It depends on what you want to accomplish. Running a community takes time, but you may be able to shift existing activities to your community. If your office already publishes a web site, sends out mass e-mail messages and runs a listserv, you could

consolidate all three functions in an online community web log. For example, if you find yourself responding to the same questions over and over, you could refer people to the community for answers. One community manager reports that the community saves time by streamlining a business process: rather than sending e-mails to dozens of recipients, his community participants just compose a new entry and publish it. They can even alert subscribers to the new entry.

### **Is a community better than a listserv?**

Listservs work well if you want to push a message to a small, defined group of people. Communities are better if you want to share your information with a broad audience. Each entry in the community site is archived, categorized, and can be searched as soon as it is published. Listserv messages aren't sorted into categories, are difficult to search, can clutter your inbox, and are available only to listserv members.

### **Can I password-protect a community?**

The servers that host the communities are not set up to support password protection.

### **Does it cost anything to start a community?**

There is no charge whatsoever to the community administrators. The Office of eDiplomacy absorbs the cost for setting up the community and follow-on technical support, provided that the community furthers knowledge-sharing and the community leaders commit to manage it effectively. There are no hosting fees.

## **eDiplomacy's responsibilities for each community**

For each community, the Office of eDiplomacy does the following:

- Creates the initial layout in conjunction with the web log administrator(s);
- Trains community administrators in the use of the software, as well as best practices for running the community;
- Maintains and troubleshoot the web log on a technical level;
- Assists the administrators as needed.

## **Community administrator responsibilities**

Day-to-day Community participants generally fall into one of two categories: administrators and readers. Administrators are in charge of the online community. Readers are anyone who visits the community site, leaves comments or e-mails an item to an administrator to publish in the community. Some communities add a third category: authors. Authors may add an entry but otherwise cannot manage the community site. Community administrators are responsible for:

- Content on the community site;
- Promotion/communications;
- Determining/creating new topic areas;
- Setting and achieving goals and performance measures;
- Recruiting new participants.

As an administrator, you will need to take steps to establish and grow the community in accordance with the goals spelled out in your planning questionnaire.

Online community sites are considered informative, not authoritative. If you intend to publish definitive guidance on subject areas under your authority, you should clearly state that on the web log, and determine in advance how to manage that.

Experience with organizational communities and web logs indicates that people participate responsibly and constructively. Nevertheless, you must be vigilant about content and prepared to modify or remove any slanderous, obscene, incorrect, or inappropriate material or commentary (administrators have this capability.) eDiplomacy cannot monitor the content of the community sites. *Community administrators should thoroughly review 5 FAM 770. Per 5 FAM 777 (Online Collaboration), community administrators must review newly posted material at least every business day.* [NOTE for non-State readers: This refers to the Foreign Affairs Manual section that concerns blogs, wikis and other collaborative tools. It is publicly available from the State Department public website at [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov) – just type 5 FAM 777 in the search box.]

## Committing to excellence

Here are some tips for making your community successful, based on experience in State and elsewhere:

**Contribute often.** Generally, it is better to post your content as short items more frequently, rather than long items less frequently. Give people a reason to come back, and they will come back.

**Avoid the magisterial style.** If you want to invite people into a conversation, use a more conversational tone. A good web log will have an atmosphere of respectful discussion.

**Respond to your audience.** From the comments you receive, you will get a sense for why your audience visits your web log. This will give you ideas for how to proceed in the future.

**Grow the community.** You don't have to do it all at once. Communities evolve. What begins as a discussion forum (the usual starting point) might turn into a powerhouse of proposals and advocacy for new practices. Your community members will ask themselves, "What do I get out of this?" As community leader, you need to ask that, too. Set realistic, near-term goals and performance measures; keep in mind the potential directions that the community could go; encourage people to use and contribute to the

community; and identify ways that the community and the Department can benefit from that evolution.

**Become self-sufficient.** eDiplomacy's Knowledge Management Action Team (KMAT) will always be available to provide support, answer questions and resolve technical difficulties. However, you should make your community as self-sufficient as possible in terms of managing your site and training new personnel. This is a practical necessity given the small KMAT staff and the rapid growth of Communities @ State.

## **Starting a community**

To start a community, fill out and submit the planning questionnaire. Thinking carefully about the strategic issues in the questionnaire is the most important step in creating your community. eDiplomacy will work with you to build your community based on the information you provide.